

Citation for published version:

Giorgio, A 2011, 'Review of 'Manuele Gagnolati and Sara Fortuna eds., The Power of Disturbance: Elsa Morante's *Aracoeli*, London: Legenda/MHRA and Maney Publishing, 2009, pp. 189+xii", *Italian Studies*, vol. 66, no. 1, pp. 144-146.

Publication date:
2011

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

University of Bath

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Manuele Gragnolati and Sara Fortuna eds., *The Power of Disturbance: Elsa Morante's Aracoeli*, London: Legenda/MHRA and Maney Publishing, 2009, pp. 189+xii.

Adalgisa Giorgio
University of Bath

The main merit of this edited volume on Elsa Morante's last novel is that, while it is coherent and summative, it also succeeds in the somewhat paradoxical task of explaining the novel's ambiguities without resolving them. Indeed, setting out to resolve *Aracoeli*'s 'agonistic' structure would go counter to the spirit of the 2008 conference in which the book originates and which was part of the Berlin Institute for Cultural Enquiry's research programme entitled 'Tension/Spannung'. The volume's (and the conference's) premise is that *Aracoeli* is the point of convergence of manifold and complex tensions that resonate with contemporary philosophical, psychological, religious, literary, and linguistic theories pertaining to questions of gender, sexuality, subjectivity, politics, and ethics. Rebecca West, one of the fourteen contributors, tells us that *Aracoeli* raises more questions than provides answers and this is 'the legacy of the greatest writers' (Chapter 3, p. 29).

This volume has a perfectly balanced structure. The Introduction (Chapter 1) is followed by four Parts, each consisting of three chapters: 'Language and (Inter-)Subjectivity', 'Psychoanalysis', 'Elsa e gli altri', 'Religion'. The four Parts are separated equally by an 'Intermezzo'. The chapters avail themselves of the entire arc of 20th Century theories and models of subjectivity and sexuality, to try to unravel Manuele's search for freedom from his all-consuming passion for his mother Aracoeli: Freud, Jung, Klein, Bowlby, Stern, Sander, Winnicott, Laplanche and Pontalis, Kristeva, Lacan, Cavarero, Muraro, Silverman, (Jessica) Benjamin, Butler. These theories serve the novel very well, illuminating the many strands and aspects of Manuele's 'condition' and of the novel.

All chapters provide strong and convincing evidence of the impossibility of fixing the novel and its characters into categories, thus illustrating its 'power of disturbance'. They analyse Morante's dismantling of opposites, uncovering the fallacy, falsifications, and conventionality of a binary view of the world: object/subject; body/soul-psyche-mind; sight/blindness; fantasy/memory; past/present; reality/fantasy-dreams-hallucinations; language/babble-silence; instinct/reason; self/other-oneness-multiplicity; East/West; masculinity/femininity; male/female; maternal/paternal; semiotic/symbolic. The contributors emphasise the blurring of borders and suggest the possibility of moving towards a healthy tense coexistence, and at times integration, of opposites. The character Aracoeli turns out to be the most cogent example of the novel's resistance to binarism. Neither Manuele nor the critics are able to extricate the good mother from the bad mother, the Madonna from the whore, the dying *bestiola* from the woman who is a force of nature or a pagan divinity. Finding it impossible to fit Aracoeli into any

one divine figure, Lingiardi proposes an esoteric cocktail of diverse goddesses (Chapter 6). Aracoeli is a hybrid (Holzhey, Chapter 5) and as such she is the greatest element of disturbance and ‘scandal’ in the novel.

In the ‘Intermezzo’ (Chapter 8), theatre director Agnese Grieco tells us how she translated the novel into the play that was staged at the Berlin conference. Of the many (literary/narrative) suggestions to be found in Grieco’s chapter and in her play (see its significantly ambiguous title *La passione di Aracoeli*, alluding to both Manuele’s passion for his mother and Aracoeli’s own ‘passion’), the central and most interesting one concerns ‘voice’. While the novel is a monologue proceeding solely from Manuele, Grieco decided to experiment with a split voice in order to convey the ambiguity of a text written by a woman, dealing with a female character, and narrated by a man: ‘Two voices, to narrate a trinity: Manuele/Aracoeli/Elsa Morante [...] an androgynous voice split into male and female [...] The mingling/confusion/coexistence of genders and identities’ (p 89). Grieco’s chosen ‘narrative’ strategy beckons to a controversial aspect of the novel, in fact a bone of contention, which is discussed in almost every chapter: the father as a producer of closure for the novel and for Manuele’s life. In Grieco’s trinity, there is no room for the father, that father that Manuele allegedly recuperates in the end.

On this fundamental issue, the chapters appear to be placed on a continuum between two poles. At one end of the scale, and early on in the volume, in Chapter 2 by the volume’s editors, we find an almost conciliatory reading that places the paternal within ‘the symbolic sphere of maternal language’: with the support of textual evidence hitherto not used by critics, Fortuna and Gragnolati demonstrate that Manuele succeeds in reintegrating the two spheres and rescuing the corporeal value of language (p. 16). In a methodologically and theoretically original move, they find that *Aracoeli* affirms the coexistence of mother and language and, in so doing, it takes the mother out of the Kristevan abject. At the other end, in the penultimate chapter, Cazalé Bérard presents a Lacanian (even though indirect) reading. She claims that Manuele has failed to achieve individuation and autonomy because of an absent father, which had prevented him from separating from the maternal womb and had caused him to carry on ‘believing himself the object of an absolute and eternal love’ (Chapter 13, p. 157). *Aracoeli* is thus Morante’s final denunciation of the demise of God the Father, a father/God that, in line with the teachings of Simone Weil, one must love even if or, rather, *as if* he did not exist. This is Manuele’s predicament: he loves his father, even though, or perhaps precisely because, the father has now fallen from grace. Cazalé Bérard’s reading is as persuasive and as well supported by textual evidence as Fortuna and Gragnolati’s.

Many chapters appear to be driven by the wish to rehabilitate a novel that had been dismissed by the critics as a ‘deep expression of despair’ (Fortuna and Gragnolati, p. 1), and the key to this rehabilitation is to be found in the final pages

of the novel, when the alleged recuperation of the father occurs. In Mussgnug's 'political' reading, the absolute nihilism and existential despair that dominate *Aracoeli* are accepted by Manuele at the end as part of nature and acknowledged, comically rather than tragically, as part and parcel of 'human finitude' (Chapter 4, p. 39). Comparing *Aracoeli* to Gadda's *La cognizione del dolore*, Stellardi reinterprets maternal boundless love as a path to salvation (not to damnation), a salvation which 'if not achieved, can at least infinitely be deferred, and expected' (Chapter 9, p. 103). In Chapter 10, Cadel sees in *Aracoeli*'s switch from maternal to paternal love and paternal order a way out of post-second world war dystopia which Pasolini's *Petrolio* is unable to find. Martínez Garrido's Chapter 11 attributes salvific power to Manuele's union with and love for the father at the end of his journey, a union that is made possible by *Aracoeli*'s sacrifice (death). Among all chapters, Holzhey's stands out for affirming the novel's resistance to closure till the very end, something that, in his opinion, guarantees the novel's vitality. By linking the last pages of the novel with previous sections, he finds strong textual evidence that 'questions the possibility that Manuele successfully completes his cure, and indicates that the sense of closure at the end of the narrative constitutes the eerie calm before a new storm' (p. 43). Holzhey seems to be (indirectly) inviting us not to take Manuele's declarations of love for his father at face value. One always wonders whether Manuele's switch to the paternal is no more than a calculated, desperate attempt to save something out of his life, an easy escape route from his subjection to *Aracoeli* and, ultimately, only an act of self-delusion.

This volume is an outstanding contribution to the scholarship on Elsa Morante. It not only comes to grips with aspects of the novel hitherto unexplored, notably Manuele's (homo)sexuality, which it does by a variety of routes, or the novel's engagement with political and ethical issues. It also explores where Morante's last novel came from, what went into it, and how it reaches out to other authors, past and present: the myth of Baubo (Deuber-Mankowsky, Chapter 7); the Jewish Cabbala (Parussa, Chapter 12); the Oriental world (Congedo, Chapter 14); the intertextual or comparative links with Dante (Fortuna and Gragnolati), Ortese and Pirandello (West), Pasolini (Mussgnug, Cadel, Congedo), Pasolini's and Almodóvar's films (Lingiardi), Gadda (Stellardi), Zambrano (Martínez Garrido), Moravia (Congedo), Weil (Cazalé Bérard).

Clarity of exposition in most chapters makes the volume an invaluable teaching tool and thus an incentive to include *Aracoeli* in advanced university courses in Italian and European literature.